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CIA Mail Snoopers Operated for 2 Decades

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By FRANK VAN RIPER

Washington, June 10 (News Bureau)—For more than two decades, the Central Intelligence Agency, acting with the knowledge of at least three postmasters general and one attorney general, opened and photographed mail in the United States that was going to or coming from Communist countries, especially the Soviet Union.

The mail project, begun at the height of the Cold War as a "valuable intelligence tool" and ended in 1973, was centered at Kennedy International Airport, according to the Rockefeller Commission

reported. Other less ambitious projects were carried out in the same period in San Francisco, Newark and New Orleans.

"While in operation, the CIA's domestic mail opening programs were unlawful," the commission concluded. "United States statutes specifically forbid opening the mail."

The panel recommended that there be no further mail openings "except with express statutory authority in time of war."

The commission also said that CIA mail "covers"—the process by which envelopes, but not their contents, are inspected—should be undertaken only "on a limited and selective basis clearly involving matters of national security."

The report said that by 1959 the mail

opening project had been expanded "to include the opening of over 13,000 letters a year." By 1961, the report said, the CIA had installed a small laboratory (in New York) "for the technical examination of letters."

CIA figures indicated that, in the last full year of operation, "The New York City mail intercept handled approximately 4.35 million items of mail and examined the outside of more than 2.3 million of those items. Photographs were taken of the exteriors of approximately 33,000 items. Some 8,700 items were opened and the contents analyzed."

The mail project, begun in the Eisenhower administration and carried through the Nixon years, went forward without the knowledge of any President, the commission maintained.

Those who did know at least some details of the project, the report said, were Postmasters General Arthur Summerfield (under Eisenhower), J. Edward Day (under Kennedy), and Winton M. Blount (under Nixon). The report also said that Attorney General John N. Mitchell knew of and approved of the project.

So mindful was the CIA that what it was doing was illegal that it even sought to fool the Post Office Department when the project was conceived in 1952, the report said. The department was originally told that only mail covers were to be involved. But a CIA memorandum observed that "once our unit is in position, its activities and influence could be extended, so as to secure from this source every drop of potential information available."